The Campaign to Destroy Martin Luther King

David Wise

Perhaps the most shocking example of the FBI's abuse of power was its campaign of unrelenting surveillance and harassment of Martin Luther King, Jr. Hoover set out to destroy King by using the full powers of the FBI against him. Various theories have been offered for Hoover's motive, and a combination of circumstances may have been involved. Hoover was enraged when King criticized the FBI. The FBI's stated rationale for bugging and tapping King was to uncover "Communist" influence on the civil rights leader. Nor was Hoover pleased with King's growing success in the use of nonviolent confrontation. The police dogs of Birmingham snarling and ripping at black men and women in the summer of 1963 created a bad image for law enforcement. "We Shall Overcome" fell harshly on Hoover's ears.

William Sullivan, the assistant director of the FBI under Hoover, said that Hoover's view of blacks was the root cause of the campaign against King. "The real reason was that Hoover disliked blacks," Sullivan told me. "He disliked Negroes. All you have to do is see how many he hired before Bobby came in. None. He told me himself he would never have one so long as he was FBI Director.[1] He disliked the civil rights movement. You had a black of national prominence heading the movement. He gave Hoover a peg by criticizing the FBI. And King upset Hoover's nice cozy relationship with Southern sheriffs and police. They helped us on bank robberies and such, and they kept the black man in his place. Hoover didn't want anything to upset that relationship with law-enforcement authorities in the South."

In the end, one is forced to conclude that the FBI sought to discredit King because J. Edgar Hoover was a racist. Hoover attacked King because King was black and powerful, and his power was growing. Who could foretell what might happen if the black people of America were to become mobilized behind such a leader? To Hoover, Martin Luther King was uppity and biggity, and he had to be stopped.

The FBI's fear that King might become a black "messiah" was expressed in precisely these words in a memo from headquarters to field offices on March 4, 1968, one month before King's death.

The memo said one of the goals of the FBI's counter-intelligence program (COINTELPRO) against "Black Nationalist-Hate Groups" would be to prevent the rise of a "messiah" who could unify, and electrify, the militant black nationalist movement. Martin Luther King might "aspire to this position," the memo added. "King could be a very real contender for this position should he abandon his supposed 'obedience' to 'white, liberal doctrines' (nonviolence) and embrace black nationalism."

Just before King's march on Washington in August 1963, Sullivan and Hoover began an exchange of memos about the degree of communist influence among blacks in the civil rights movement. Sullivan, who had earlier reported to Hoover that he saw no communist threat in King's movement, soon told Hoover what he knew Hoover wanted to hear: "...we regard Martin Luther King to be the most dangerous and effective Negro leader in the country."

The FBI had begun surveillance of King's civil rights activities during the late Fifties. In January 1962 the FBI warned Attorney General Robert Kennedy that one of King's senior advisers was a "member" of the Communist party, and later that year a formal FBI investigation was opened into alleged "Communist infiltration" of King's movement. The FBI bombarded Robert Kennedy with memos warning of King's continued contacts with the adviser and with a second associate who the FBI said had strong ties to the Communist party. In February 1963, after the FBI warned that King would be meeting with the two advisers, Kennedy wrote a note to Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall: "Burke—this is not getting any better."

The FBI's avowed concern over communist influence on King centered on the figure of Stanley Levison, a New York attorney long close to the civil rights leader. In his 1971 book *Kennedy Justice*, Victor Navasky reported that Robert Kennedy gave his approval to tap King after receiving FBI reports charging that Levison and Jack O'Dell, a member of the staff of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, had "Communist" backgrounds. By Navasky's account, both President Kennedy and Robert Kennedy warned King about Levison and O'Dell in June 1963, and King then agreed to sever relations with the two men. O'Dell was eased out of the SCLC, Navasky wrote, but King after a time resumed his friendship with Levison. According to Navasky, who cites information from "Kennedyites," this convinced Hoover that King was under communist control and led him to increase his pressure on Robert Kennedy to approve the wiretap-

[1] After Robert Kennedy became attorney general, he asked Hoover how many black agents the FBI had, Sullivan testified to the Church committee. Hoover replied that the Bureau did not categorize people by race, creed, or color. That was laudatory, Kennedy said, but he still needed to know how many black agents there were in the FBI. Hoover had five black chauffeurs in the Bureau, Sullivan said, "so he automatically made them special agents." In 1975 there were 8,000 FBI special agents, of whom 103 were black—still far below the percentage of blacks in the US population as a whole.

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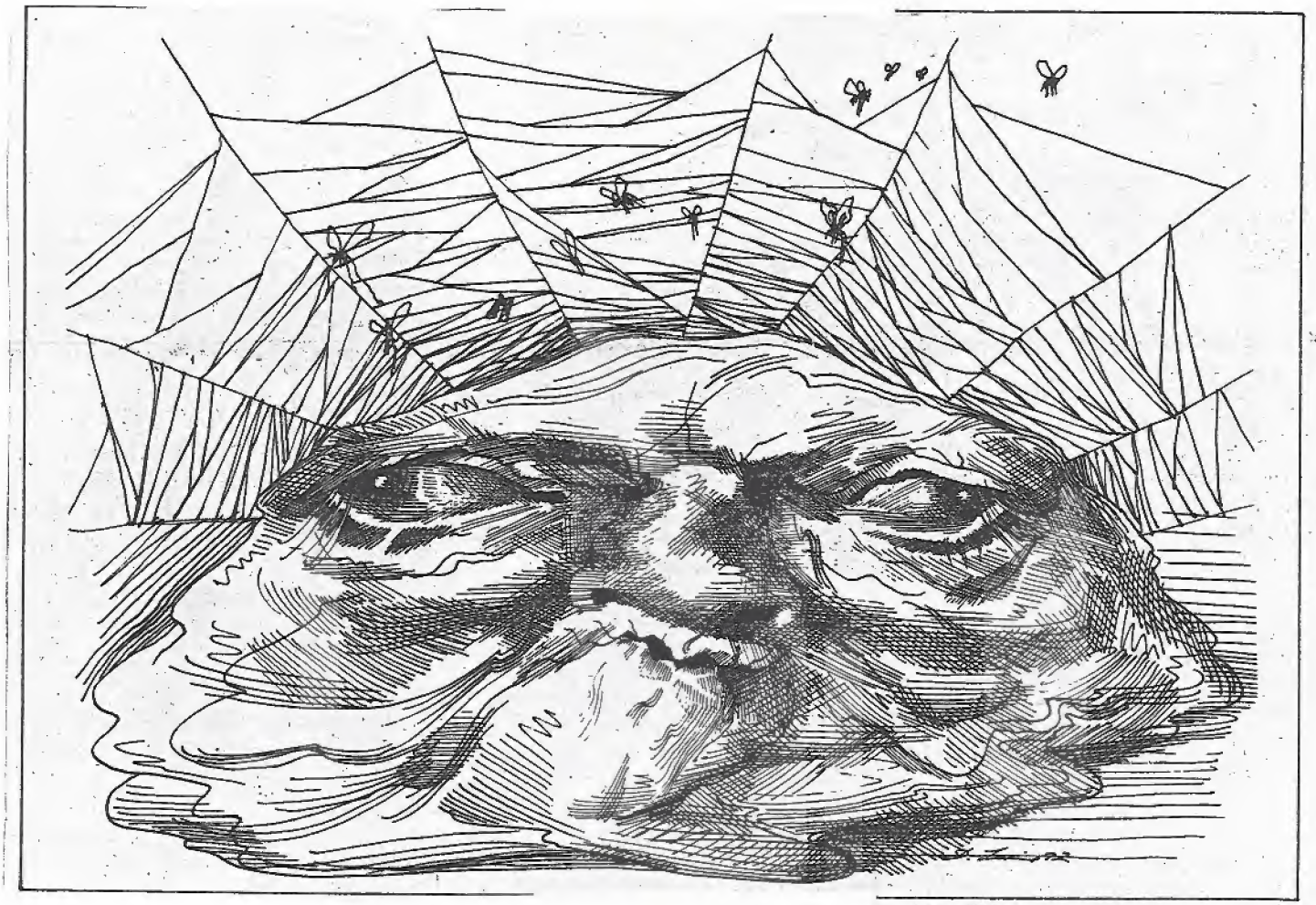

ping of King.

If a few communists or former communists had been associated with King, there would have been nothing illegal about it. But in fact, King and the SCLC had an explicit policy that no communist or communist sympathizer could serve on the staff of the SCLC. The FBI's charges against King have never been substantiated.

In an interview with *The Washington Post* in December, 1975, Levison said: "I was never a member of the Communist Party. I did know some people who were.... Particularly in the 1930s and 1940s you scarcely could have been an intellectual in New York without knowing some." Levison said he was a victim of "guilt by association." The final report of the Church committee notes that two FBI reports "which summarize the FBI's information about Adviser A"—Levison is not named—"do not contain evidence substantiating his

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Hoover, pleased, replied, "I am glad to see that 'light' has finally, though dismally delayed, come to the Domestic Intelligence Division. I struggled for months to get over the fact that the Communists were taking over the racial movement, but our experts here couldn't or wouldn't see it. H."

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Rumors circulated in Washington that the FBI had offered to let trusted reporters either see the transcripts of the bugging of King's hotel rooms or listen to the actual tapes. In 1976 Benjamin Bradlee, the editor of *The Washington Post*, said that he had been offered a transcript of a King tape by Cartha D. (Deke) DeLoach, assistant director of the FBI, in the fall of 1964. At the time, Bradlee was chief of *Newsweek*'s Washington bureau. "The circumstances involved a cover story we were doing on Hoover," Bradlee told me. "I had finally succeeded in getting an interview with Hoover. It was to be me, Jay Iselin, and Dwight Martin from New York. On the morning of the interview we all had breakfast together to plan the interview, and then went back to the office around nine-thirty. The phone rings and it's DeLoach. Martin is not acceptable to the Director. In an act I regret, we [Bradlee and Iselin] went over alone. We went in and saw Hoover and asked one question and he talked for thirty minutes."

According to Bradlee, the interview was worthless. Afterward, Bradlee said, he met alone with DeLoach, who had promised to explain why Martin was barred.

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remarks by King referred to Jacqueline Kennedy, Bradlee replied, "Yes."[1]

According to Iselin, in the cab going back to the *Newsweek* office Bradlee told him that DeLoach's conversation had been along the lines of "What do you think of a black man fooling around with white women?" Iselin told me: "Ben was offered the tapes. I remember my slack-jawed astonishment. We obviously declined to have anything to do with it." Bradlee, Iselin recalls, said the tapes had been described to him as "based on the bugging of hotel rooms of King. They would get white girls in the rooms...that sort of thing."

In October, *Newsweek* gave a large party to celebrate the opening of its new offices on the twelfth floor of an office building a block from the White House. Attorney General Katzenbach was there, and Iselin remembers needling Katzenbach and Burke Marshall, the assistant attorney general in charge of the Civil Rights Division. What kind of operation were they running, peddling smut, he asked them.

Katzenbach said that at the *Newsweek* offices Bradlee told him that the tapes he had been offered were "from hotel rooms and involved sexual activities.... Bradlee said DeLoach had offered interesting tapes, with a leer."

Katzenbach described the incident to the Church committee, without revealing the names of Bradlee and Iselin. He testified that he had been dismayed "and felt that the President should be advised immediately." He flew with Burke Marshall to the LBJ Ranch, where he told Johnson of his conversation with Bradlee, warning "that this was shocking conduct and politically extremely dangerous to the Presidency. I told the President my view that it should be stopped immediately and that he should personally contact Mr. Hoover."

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When I interviewed DeLoach, he disputed the accounts of Bradlee, Iselin, and Katzenbach. DeLoach said he had arranged an interview for Bradlee "with Mr. Hoover. The day before, Bradlee said he wanted to bring the man who would write the story. When he asked to bring the additional man, Mr. Hoover said have a file check. As a result of the file check, Mr. Hoover said he did not want to see the man." DeLoach added, "At no point did I ever offer Bradlee the transcripts or to play the tape." DeLoach also denied that Katzenbach had questioned him about making such an offer to Bradlee. "Absolutely not," he said. "He did not ask about the transcripts."

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You have just 34 days in which to do it. This exact number has been selected for a specific reason. It has definite practical significance. You are done."

The letter was mailed three weeks before King was due to receive the Nobel prize in Oslo, on December 10. Since it was accompanied by a tape which the FBI considered compromising, the letter could be interpreted as an invitation to King to kill himself. Apparently that is how King construed it, for Congressman Young told the Church committee that when King received the tape and the letter, "he felt somebody was trying to get him to commit suicide."

William Sullivan told me that he had, on orders from Hoover, arranged to have a tape mailed to Mrs. King. He said he received the order from Hoover's assistant, Alan H. Belmont.[10]

> Belmont called me. We met at his request and he said Hoover and Tolson wanted certain tapes sent to Coretta King. I objected, not on moral grounds, but on practical grounds. I said, "She'll know immediately that the FBI made the tapes."
>
> Belmont said King has been critical of Hoover and Hoover wants to stop that, and the tapes will blackmail him [King] into stopping. And Belmont said he was going to have the tapes sanitized so that Mrs. King will not know that they came from the FBI. He said, "I'll arrange to have the tapes selected and I'll have them sent to you in a box."

In due course, Sullivan said, the box arrived, and he had the impression the tape it contained was "a composite of three tapes."

Had the FBI put together a composite in order to select what it considered the most damaging parts of the various hotel room tapes to send to Mrs. King? "Probably," Sullivan told me, "but I understood it was to sanitize, to disguise the FBI origin. Perhaps it was a composite of more than three tapes, I don't know." The work was done by the FBI laboratory, the same one proudly shown to the thousands of tourists who visit FBI headquarters each year in Washington. "I think Belmont called the lab," Sullivan said. "I don't know how it was done.

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*Who wrote the letter was a matter of dispute. The text quoted at the Church committee hearings was, according to the FBI, found in the files of William Sullivan some time after he was forced out by Hoover. Sullivan claimed that the draft was a plant written by someone else and placed in his files to embarrass him.

The significance of the "thirty-four days" was not clarified by the Senate intelligence committee. But from November 21, the date the tape was mailed, it would have been exactly thirty-four days to Christmas Day.

James B. Adams, deputy associate director of the FBI, testified he could not "find any basis" on which the committee staff had concluded the letter was "a suicide urging." That annoyed Senator Church:

> *The Chairman*: It is certainly no Christmas card, is it?
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[10]Sullivan testified he was told by Belmont that Hoover wanted the tape mailed to Mrs. King to break up her marriage and diminish King's stature.

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said he wanted it mailed from a Southern city. I picked an agent who was a very close-mouthed fellow; I picked him because I knew he wouldn't talk about it. I never told him what was in the box. I told him what the assignment was. 'Take this down to Tampa and mail it,' and he did. He came back and told me it had been done. I never discussed it with Hoover afterward. He never mentioned it to me."[1]

With the Hoover-King controversy now threatening to undermine King's leadership and endanger the civil rights movement, other black leaders urged King to meet with the FBI director. King, the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, and other SCLC leaders met with Hoover and DeLoach in Hoover's office on December 1. Precisely what was said is not clear. DeLoach has described it as "a very amicable meeting, a pleasant meeting between two great symbols of leadership." Hoover, he said, told King that "in view of your stature and reputation and your leadership with the black community, you should do everything possible to be careful of your associates and be careful of your personal life, so that no question will be raised concerning your character at any time."

This is supposed to have been said at a time when the FBI was bugging and wiretapping King's hotel rooms—as King now knew, since he had received the tape—and leaking stories about King's sex life to reporters. For the moment, Hoover's blackmail techniques seemed to work. A subdued King said after the meeting that he and Hoover had reached "new levels of understanding."

The tape, the apparent suicide letter, and the attempt to impugn King's moral character were the most vicious aspects of the FBI's campaign. But the FBI's harassment of King reached as well into pettier matters. According to Frederick Schwarz, the Church committee's counsel, the FBI in 1964 sought to block Marquette University from giving King an honorary degree "because it was thought unseemly," since the university had once granted an honorary degree to Hoover. Later that year the FBI learned that King planned to visit Pope Paul VI. John Malone, the head of the FBI's New York office, was dispatched to see Cardinal Spellman to persuade him to intervene with the Pope and prevent the audience. Malone thought he had succeeded, but the Pope met with King anyhow. "Astounding," Hoover wrote on a memo. "I am amazed...."

Four years later King went to Memphis to participate in a strike of city garbage workers. The FBI campaign had not abated, for on March 28, 1968, the FBI drafted a blind memo—bearing no FBI markings—for distribution to "cooperative news media." "The fine Hotel Lorraine in Memphis is owned and patronized exclusively by Negroes," the memo said, "but King did not go there." Instead, King was staying at "a plush Holiday Inn Motel, white-owned, operated, and almost exclusively white patronized." The purpose of the proposed planted news item, the FBI documents said, was "to publicize hypocrisy on the part of Martin Luther King." Hoover signed the FBI memo, "Okay, H."

It was not established whether the memo was sent to the press, but King did change hotels. He went home to Atlanta, and when he returned to Memphis the following week, he moved into the Lorraine. Standing there on the balcony outside his room, he was shot and killed on April 4, 1968. James Earl Ray, a small-time escaped convict, pleaded guilty to the crime a year later and was sentenced to ninety-nine years in prison. But whether he acted alone or was part of a conspiracy remains an open question.

When the Church committee disclosed details of the FBI's campaign against King, including the "suicide" letter, questions were publicly raised about whether the FBI's actions against King could conceivably have extended to complicity in his murder. On November 26, 1975, Attorney General Edward H. Levi ordered a review of the FBI's investigation into the death of Martin Luther King.

Conducted by J. Stanley Pottinger, head of the Justice Department's civil rights division, the review found "no basis to believe that the FBI in any way caused the death of Dr. King," or that the FBI's investigation of his death had been less than thorough. But the study concluded that "the FBI undertook a systematic program of harassment of Dr. King in order to discredit him and harm both him and the movement he led." Although Pottinger found no evidence of FBI complicity in King's death, he said it was "possible" that a more detailed survey of the files would reach a different conclusion.

On April 29, Levi announced that an expanded investigation and a review of some 200,000 FBI documents on King would be conducted by a task force under Michael E. Shaheen, director of the department's Office of Professional Responsibility. Levi said the new investigation would be asked to determine whether "the FBI was involved in the assassination of Dr. King" and whether the FBI's actions against King require "criminal prosecutions." A Justice Department spokesman said recently that the task force was expected to report "by January 1."

On September 17 of this year, the House of Representatives voted to establish a select committee to investigate the murders of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., and empowered it to inquire into other assassinations as well. In its final report, the Church committee concluded: "The actions taken against Dr. King are indefensible. They represent a sad episode in the dark history of covert actions directed against law abiding citizens by a law enforcement agency." □

[1] Although the whole purpose of the exercise was to mail the tape to Coretta King, the FBI agent who went to Florida told the Senate intelligence committee that he had mailed it to "Martin Luther King, Jr." on Sullivan's instructions. Andrew Young said the tape was received at SCLC headquarters in Atlanta and later sent to King's home.

The tape, regardless of the FBI's motive in sending it, apparently had very little effect. In an interview in *The New York Times* on March 9, 1975, Mrs. King acknowledged to correspondent Nicholas Horrock that she had listened to such a tape. "I received a tape that was rather curious, unlabeled," she said. "As a matter of fact, Martin and I listened to the tape and we found much of it unintelligible. We concluded there was nothing in the tape to discredit him." Mrs. King also said that she and her husband realized the tape had been made covertly and "presumed" it had been done by the FBI.